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Business History and the Historiographical Operation

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the implications of the epistemological position taken by writers of business history through a critical hermeneutic reading of recent key statements within this field. Using the theoretical lens provided by Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, we concentrate on the potentially reflexive nature of the historiographical operation that is involved in transforming memory into history. We argue that there is little sign of reflexive historiography within business history and suggest that this reluctance goes some way towards explaining the sub-discipline's relative isolation from the rest of organization and management studies.

Keywords

business history, epistemology, Ricoeur, reflexivity, historiography

[7,844 words]

Introduction

Paul Ricoeur's name is mentioned frequently by historians working in business schools, sometimes his work is cited or quoted, yet historical analysis that mobilizes his ideas in depth and detail is rare. A simple empirical illustration helps support this claim. An August 2007 citation search on the Web of Knowledge database returned 20 references to Ricoeur's last substantial work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. A few of these citations are in management and organization studies journals but none are in specialist business history journals. A similar search for the French edition of the book published in 2000 returns 27 citations, none in any management and organization studies journal. The absence of this key contribution to understanding the historiographical operation in accounts of business history is all the more surprising when we notice the enthusiasm with which Ricoeur's work on narrative and time has been taken up within organization studies (see Sonsino 2005, for a review).

This paper is an attempt to understand the neglect of this book in particular and the ideas it expresses in general. We present an extended reading of *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Ricoeur 2004, hereafter *MHF*), and interpret the arguments we find in it in the light of six recent statements of what business history is and should be. Our analysis takes business history to be the historical analysis of management, organizations, industries, and commerce. Based on our interpretation of the arguments Ricoeur presents, we suggest that there is a dominant but hidden epistemological (and therefore theoretical) position which underpins the conduct of business history as presented in our sample. From this we argue that closer examination of this foundational aspect of the historiographical operation might help to illuminate the field to other members of the management research community, an aim that business historians currently claim to pursue.

Our source for this analysis is four review papers from what is generally acknowledged to be the premier journal in the field, *Business History*, published in 1992, 2001, 2003 and 2007. In these papers, invited authors provide a summary and analysis of work from two years previously. We bracket these papers with two editorial policy statements published in the same journal in 1990 and 2007, which set an editorial agenda and aim to give 'state of the nation' account of the conduct of business history. Based on these materials and our own engagement with business history (through primary research and analysis, conference presentations and publication) we want to raise the following possibility for debate. Business history as currently constituted, primarily through presentation of work and journal publication, at best neglects and at worst ignores the epistemological positions that are inherent to historical research and writing. We suggest that failing to take account of, or acknowledge beyond passing mention, theoretical developments in humanities and social sciences, which provide the doing of history and those self-defining as historians with a disciplinary context, contributes to the continuing marginalization of historical research and writing from the main currents of organization studies. Through this we also consider the argument that it is potentially dangerous to write about the doing of history:

Why should historians write about the nature of history (rather than just do it)? The reasons are no doubt various. It may be an intellectual conversion from one perspective to another. It might be a desire to express epistemological certainty prompted by annoyance at those who are lapsing. Equally, it could be epistemological scepticism prompted by annoyance at those who are not

lapsing. It may be the nature of their professional training. It could be a rejection of their training prompted by concerns over the nature of the relationship between reference, explanation, meaning, truth and narrative. But whatever the reason it is always a risky business.

(Munslow 2007, 613)

Munslow goes on to argue that part of the risk in challenging the empirical-analytical approach that continues to dominate the discipline is the danger of undermining the credibility of historical narratives. Our contention, which we think Munslow would be sympathetic to, is that the ‘safety’ of ‘theorizing in a [theoretical or epistemological] vacuum’ (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000, 287) is a false security that makes historical accounts of management and organization easier to dismiss or marginalise.

This is important because, as in other sub-fields of organization studies such as small business research, our experience is that business historians are prone to bemoaning the marginality of their work. We suggest that the solution or resolution to this problem lies in part in the hands of those doing historical research. This would involve considerable re-orientation at an individual and collective level. We present our arguments and suggestions in the spirit of a gentle *apologia*, defending our position and ‘giving reasons, with room for doubt, directed to nonbelievers’ (McCloskey 2006, 1) to those suspicious of the utility of epistemological inquiry or reflection in the historiographical operation.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we set out our reading of the arguments that Ricoeur presents. Second, we interpret the key aspects of this redefinition of the historiographical operation and its implications for representing organizational pasts. Through our reading of the six papers published in *Business History* we then provide an account of the progression of business history. Finally we look at recent changes to the conduct of historical research and writing and explore the potential implications of these in light of our argument.

Lest we remember: The presence of memory, testifying history and the possibility of forgetting

It is important to note here that the book under discussion here forms part of a body of work that Paul Ricoeur built over the course of more than fifty years. From the base discipline of philosophy Ricoeur’s work explored theology, ethics, and the possibility of understanding the self. The majority of his writings are directed towards developing a ‘philosophical anthropology’ that enables understanding of the capabilities and weaknesses we all have or display as we make our way through the world. Many commentators note the methodological ‘shift’ that Ricoeur made during his career from existential phenomenology to a more hermeneutic approach supported by phenomenological description. Alongside temporality, discourse, agency, narrative, identity, ethics, and politics, memory and history are generally accepted to be key themes in Ricoeur’s work. He takes this action and dynamic as fundamental to our ability to constitute ourselves as people, to understand our actions as we engage with the world around us and as the subject of his last book. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to engage with the entire course of Ricoeur’s work. Our purpose instead is to interpret what is generally understood to be a summative text in the light of recent developments and stated ambitions within business history. To this end we

take for granted the foundations of the book in Ricoeur's previous work and the philosophical traditions he worked within.

From the title on, *MHF* is a book of triads. Introducing the text the author explains that its genesis lies in private, professional and public preoccupations. Privately, coming knowingly to the end of a long life, he was concerned with what happens to individuals' memory and the process of forgetting, both of which he defines as the median levels between temporal experience and the narrative operations involved in constructing self. Professionally, memory and forgetting are (or ought to be) key problematics for historians, a community Ricoeur counted himself as part of. Finally, there is a public concern, a civic duty to explore memory and forgetting as some events are unjustly forgotten while others are unduly celebrated. The book is structured into three parts: Part I is devoted to memory and related phenomena, underpinned by Husserlian phenomenology; Part II is dedicated to history, and in particular epistemologies of the historical sciences; last, Part III is presented as a meditation on forgetting, to enable a hermeneutics of the historical condition of being human. Each Part then unfolds in turn through three sections of its own:

1. the phenomenology of memory: the object of memory (memory as it is given), the search for particular objects (recollection, or the exercise of memory), reflective memory, memory of oneself;
2. epistemologies of history: witnessing and archives, the use of 'because' in figures of explanation and understanding, historians' representation of the past;
3. a hermeneutics of the historical condition: critical hermeneutics of history, 'attentive to the limits of historical knowledge that a certain hubris of historical science transgresses again and again' (*MHF*, xvi), ontological hermeneutics to explore modalities of temporalization, and 'the empire of forgetting'.

Despite the complexity of this structure and the issues addressed, and the density of Ricoeur's writing, the argument is made coherent by a common problematic – metaphorically, the ship that Ricoeur's three sails are masted in is 'representation of the past'. This overarching definition of the main theme of the book draws directly on the Platonic notion of the *eikōn*, translated as image/icon/likeness and defined as the 'presence of an absent thing stamped with the seal of the anterior' (*MHF*, xvi). This leads directly to the claim that memory sits within imagination, an argument that forms the basis of our interpretation of the ideas this book contains and our contention that they have implications for the conduct of business history.

Part I 'On memory and recollection' is taken up with two questions: what are memories and who do they belong to? This is an attempt to draw out the nature of mnemonic phenomena as they are often our only resource in referring to the past and trying to be faithful to it. The topic is set up as important because it is an attempt to distinguish between remembering and imagining, to examine the truth claims made by and for memory. In the Platonic beginnings of philosophical inquiry into memory, truth and falsehood are accorded equivalent ontological and epistemological status, implying that they are versions of the same thing. Within this is the question of whether history is mimetic or imaginary. Throughout we are reminded of the status of 'memory as the womb of history, inasmuch as memory remains the guardian of the entire problem of the representative relation of the present to the past' (*MHF*, 87). It is a very positive approach to understanding memory, both received and sought, arguing

that the dysfunctions of memory should not be treated as pathological but rather as a 'shadowy underside of the bright region of memory' (*MHF*, 21). Attempting to remember has a truthful ambition and should not be criticized for that as we have nothing better. The end-point of this section is the observation that a commitment to critical agency is needed to critique what are defined as false testimonies and oppose them with more reliable accounts.

This argument involves the recognition that history is inevitably bound up with understandings of time, founded on Aristotle's observation 'but memory is of the past', which is contrasted with the sensation of the present and the conjecture of the future. Ricoeur aims to present a potential solution to the problem of the truth or falsity of memory (and hence the issues of mimesis and imagination) by separating our initial impressions and then their 'others', or representations and impressions, achieved through the act of recollection. Crucially, this section of the book produces a perspective on the process of recalling individual events from the past and those recollections as mirrors of reality and nature that are dynamic, addressing the 'effort to recall'. Thus a distinction is made between spontaneous, relaxed 'simple evocation' and laborious, tense 'effort to recall', between the simple passive presence of memories and the effortful agentic act of recollection; this brings the possibility of error or illusion in the act of remembering to the fore.

This basis then allows Ricoeur to construct a positive phenomenology of memory. The key argument stems from a reading of Husserl's work which suggests that reproduction is an act of imagination. This involves the reader in a 'double imbroglia' (*MHF*, 50): memories return to us as images that are then presented in a form that seeks to be real (i.e. non-imagined, non-imaginative). This raises what Ricoeur calls the 'background question' of trust that exploration of memory brings to the study of history, in the sense that we are all implicated as agents in the search for historical truth, inasmuch as we bring either 'faithfulness' or the desire to be true to something. The need of those remembering and their historians to be true to something takes us into the uses and abuses of exercising memory – the pragmatics and practicality of memory as an action, power or capacity – in other words, how and why we 'do' remembering. This makes way for another theme: how does the exercise of memory affect the ambition to truth? The possibility of bad mimetics or abuse of memory and history implies that both are vulnerable because of the absence of the object and its necessary representation. Drawing at various points on works by Freud, Weber, Marx, and Nietzsche, three levels of abuse are outlined, in order of the degree of control sought over the process:

1. *pathological therapeutic* - blocked memory (Freud);
2. *practical* - manipulated memory (Weber, Marx);
3. *ethico-political* – memory abusively summoned, forced memory (commemoration-rememoration).

Justice to the other, paying our debt to those gone as well as inventorying their heritage and giving moral priority to the victim of history are suggested as humanistic responses to the question of the 'duty of memory'.

Memory is argued to be first individual and then collective, an important shift in the process of the historiographical operation. As Ricoeur notes, many argue for the private, individual character of memory, in which memory consciousness is tied to the past and is integral to personal identity. Yet there are possibilities of collective

memory and an intermediate level of reference where exchanges are made between living individual memory and public memory.

Part II, 'History, epistemology', addresses the 'self-sufficiency of history's own self-awareness' (*MHF*, 135); that is, the isolation of history from other social sciences and the observation that the philosophical project that informs history is tacit. For Ricoeur this separation and tacit philosophical positioning should not be countenanced. He suggests that the historical operation is seen as tripartite, with three methodological moments interwoven (that is, not necessarily chronologically successive):

1. *documentary*: the establishment of documentary proof through statements or archives;
2. *explanation/understanding*: the stage in which 'because' is mobilized to answer 'why', and hence the major epistemological moment;
3. *representation*: putting the history into literary or written form.

Each stage is explored in detail. The documentary phase is approached through the notion of inscription and the key moments in the transformation from oral to archival through 'memorization': from memory to testimony (bearing witness), and from testimony given to testimony received (the construction of the archive by the historian). Testimony is thus defined as the process of making memory documentary and the trustworthiness we assign to the statements or archives generated in this process. Should the testimony be certified and accredited? If it is then the process of making an archive begins. A physical, spatial and social space is made for testimony, that 'qualified personnel' might use; it will have an intent to preserve, organized material, and allow consultation. According to Ricoeur, archives must always be interrogated to establish how the observation happened in order to enable the testimony and the nature of the testimonial artifact (voluntary, involuntary, written, material) to be critiqued and to encourage corroboration and problematisation.

Archives are more than this, however. The nature of archives, as the empirical basis that historians tend to work from, occupies a substantial part of the discussion in *MHF*, centrally in this part and as a secondary theme in the others. There are two main facets to this exploration: the status of documents in an archive, and the relation between testimony and document. The relation between memory and the contents of the archive is a significant epistemological move made by historians, from 'raw' data to 'scientific' data. Ricoeur notes that testimony enters a 'critical zone', being confronted with other, perhaps conflicting, testimonies and a mass of other archival documents. This shift from being private to public is also noted in Derrida's (1998) examination of the contemporary archive. Thus memory passes from being personal to being a public claim about the past when it contributes to an archive. Memory is externalized in testimony, inscribed, preserved and sometimes consulted by historians.

Ricoeur also presents a strong argument that the archive is socially constructed through the historiographical operation. The status of testimony comes into question, working from the basis that there are many psychological and social barriers to accuracy or truth in testimonies and the possibility of documentary proof. Proof, the argument runs, is dependent on the questions that a historian brings to an archive: 'the documents do not speak unless someone asks them to verify, that is, to make true, some hypothesis' (*MHF*, 177). Facts, documents, and questions are therefore interdependent. The question, along with the trace and the document, constructs the historical object and historical knowledge. Within this facts have a referential status

as the 'what' of historical discourse, distinct from how the referent happened. Notably, facts are not events.

The central operation in the process detailed in Part II is the construction of explanation and understanding in historical writing. This is where the epistemological autonomy of history in relation to memory is most visible, as it is where we see the connector 'because' being used. Throughout this section Ricoeur examines the construction of human reality as a social fact and history's place within the social sciences. The argument reviews 20th century French schools of historical thought, particularly the crisis of thought that the Annales school generated and the 'new rigorous' approach to history that Foucault, de Certeau, and Elias exemplify. The reader is taken into the area of representation, the process through which social agents represent a historical object and the subsequent process through which historians produce a representation of the agentic representation of the historical object. The key problematic here is the role of writing in explanation and understanding. This then is the third part of the historiographical operation, the 'scriptural representation' (in de Certeau's words) of making the historical text. Ricoeur is here at pains to emphasize that interpretation is not limited to this stage, as it stretches across all stages of historiography. Narrative forms of representation and the relation of historical discourse to fiction are explored, as are the resources mobilized and the representational capacities of history. This section engages very closely with the truth claims that history makes, in for example examining how narrative coherence may be distinguished from causal or teleological connections drawn in explanation/ understanding through the notion of emplotment (defined as co-ordination between events, causes, intentions, accidents, and narration into a single meaningful unity). Despite the close relations of history and fiction, however, a clear distinction remains for Ricoeur because of the external referent that historians work with, the extratextual reality that history claims to relate to.

Part II ends with consideration of representation and rhetoric, a key theme for some scholars writing history since the linguistic turn in the social sciences and humanities. This is an area that for Ricoeur has the potential to turn history away from the past, from the real referent. Here we engage with what are characterized as attacks on history, in which for example its practice is closely compared to the 19th century novel through ideas such as the 'referential illusion'. Ideas such as this led some to argue that historical writing does not refer to the real but only the intelligible and that superfluous details are used to disguise the narrative structure and intent of historical writing. Ricoeur challenges this thread of critique through the observation that historical writing must pass through documents, causal/teleological explanation and literary emplotment, but that none of these aspects make it fictional. Analyses that suggest history is 'mere fiction', he argues, are theories of style or imagination, refined taxonomies, and not a useful alternative to the naïve realism of some historical writing. Ricoeur is clear in not being opposed to the role of narrativity in constructing meaning and accepts that narrative cannot be seen as 'a neutral, transparent garment thrown over a signification complete in its meaning' (*MHF*, 276). However he argues that we must remember the equality of status that explanation and documents share in seeking to accredit the truth of historical discourse, and always return to the testimony of the witness that provides correspondence between representation and event. In the end, referring to the past must involve both a claim to reality and a statement about

how we experience the world – hence, it is both epistemological and ontological. This brings us to the third and final part of the book.

Part III examines the ‘historical condition’, and presents a ‘speculative philosophy of history’. It is both critical and ontological, with the task of imposing limits on totalizing claims to knowledge. The text is mainly concerned with the notion of forgetting, defined as both an enemy of memory and a reserve that it can draw on. Ricoeur takes forgiveness as his ultimate end-point, fulfilling his initial aim of developing a critical hermeneutic of the historiographical operation

The first section begins with moves towards a critical philosophy of history, through a metahistorical conception of the historiographical operation that allows exploration of the claims history makes to self-knowledge and legitimacy through objectivity. Importantly for our argument, the initial chapter in Part III takes up the issue of whether history can be self-sufficient, total in and of itself. Through the work of a further wide variety of contributors to understanding history (Nietzsche, Koselleck, Nagel, Ginzburg, and others), Ricoeur argues that the notion of history is a ‘collective singular’, seen more clearly in German where we find the signifiers *Geschichte* (complex of events) and *Historie* (knowledge, narrative, historical science). Yet history as a collective singular is challenged by the argument that human plurality is hopelessly various and cosmopolitan, resulting in the high degree of specialization by professional historians that disallows global history. From this, the narrative moves on to examine the idea of a ‘single historical moment’ in which a historical present is established by some historians as a unique observation point. This links to attempts by both judges and historians to occupy a space that allows for impartiality, a possibility that is undermined by the emplacement of both history and the judicial process (we are encouraged here to think of differing interpretations of the Salem witch-trials and the trials of contemporary terrorists). These considerations bring the reader back once more to White’s (1987) critique of the rhetorical nature of history to conclude that the judicial process must ultimately judge the plausibility of narrative accounts of historical events, something that Ricoeur suggests White’s framework does not allow for.

This entire section is also underpinned by the conjoined notions of interpretation and self. Ricoeur argues for second order reflection on the historiographical process, emphasizing the impossibility of totally reflective knowledge and yet simultaneously acknowledging our desire for validity of some kind in our historical writings. Unfortunately this debate is often framed in terms of subjectivity-objectivity, but this, according to Ricoeur, does not distinguish between the self of pathos and the self of research, nor does it critique subjectivity as extensively as objectivity. This further distinction allows for exploration of the many ways in which interpretation runs through historiography and in particular the ‘subtle connection between personal motivation and public reasoning’ (*MHF*, 339). Exploring interpretation thus becomes another means of exploring the nature of truth in history.

The second chapter in this part takes up in detail a theme that bobs to the surface throughout the book, time. Ricoeur argues that consideration of temporality marks the passage from critical hermeneutics to ontological hermeneutics, in which the historical condition is seen as an ‘unsurpassable mode of being’ (*MHF*, 343); acknowledging the temporality of being is therefore an existential precondition for

understanding the nature of history. This is pursued through consideration of Augustine's suggestion that the present dominates and Heidegger's counter that the future and death are more significant. The chapter is structured around analysis of (and confrontation with) Heidegger's notion of *Da-sein*, its three modalities of temporalization and the introduced notion of care as an alternative ultimate referent. At this point Ricoeur introduces his final pivotal argument, that history is in part a means of representing the dead, a kind of sepulcher transformed by historiography into writing, a means of making clear that the dead were once alive, that the 'dead of today are yesterday's living' (*MHF*, 380), a kind of resurrection, reenactment, recollection. All because we have a debt to the past and the dead to remember and to repeat, but all the while remembering 'the 'thickness' of the interpretive processes interpolated between the present representation and the 'having-been' of the repeated past' (*MHF*, 382).

This takes us to the final twist in what seems at times a very long road from memory, through history, to forgetting. According to the final chapter forgetting and forgiveness designate the horizon of the entire book; each is distinct yet they come together at a non-place where memory is appeased and we can forget happily. Forgetting is however also emblematic of the vulnerability of memory and history, as its possibility challenges the essences of both. As well as that, forgetting is argued to be psychologically and ideologically possible, and here Ricoeur maps out the 'hard' version of the linguistic turn in the social sciences to demonstrate what a dead end he considers it. While we must of course recognize the power relations embedded in writing, Ricoeur once again suggests that narrative analysis on its own is a trap in attempts to understand the historiographical operation. He turns to the original social actors who are continuously in danger of being stripped of their voices and yet can be complicit in this, as they don't always want to know/remember themselves; hence the challenge, '... dare to give an account of yourself!' (*MHF*, 449). This is finally explored with reference to the experiences of the French in relation to the Second World War and the 'structuring of forgetfulness' practiced in that society for a generation.

In this conclusion we find an echo of another treatise on the nature of history which Ricoeur takes as his starting point for the final section. Nietzsche (1980[1874]) (in)famously argued that historical accounts are only of use or value if they move beyond 'objective' uncovering of facts, monumental or antiquarian history. He critiques history that claims to be objective for its focus on the high points of the past and an implicit belief in continuity and generalization; both past and present are distorted by the neglect of all except 'great men' and their actions. However, the other side of this means of conducting the historiographical operation, antiquarian history, is characterised by a glorification of the past in an attempt to preserve and reproduce it. Antiquarian historians are thus possessed by detail and apt to romanticise or venerate the past. Equally, a third approach, 'critical history', is flawed in its assumption that all previous actions must be judged as inadequate or weak, leading to despair and nihilism. Ricoeur's encouragement to work towards the conduct of history through critical agency chimes with Nietzsche's solution to this impasse but also extends well beyond it in the encouragement to act, through historical accounts and analysis, as a service that enables life and action in the 'never to be completed imperfect tense' (Nietzsche 1980, 9). This requires a judicious balance between living ahistorically in the moment of action and historical reflection which is used to inform

action. In short, history should be undertaken for the sake of life and must always be understood in the context of contemporary action.

This structures the final pages of *MHF*, where the historiographical operation is finally brought back to considerations of public or social obligation, as the boundary between forgetting and forgiving is crossed in consideration of pardon and amnesty, institutionalized forms of forgetting. The obvious difficulties in these processes are the potential to erase the past, inhibit learning, condemn competing memories and discourage *dissensus*. We might be deprived of the ‘salutary identity crisis that permits a lucid reappropriation of the past and its traumatic charge’ (*MHF*, 456). Despite this, Ricoeur wishes to retain the possibility that forgetting can achieve integrity through the work of memory, mourning and forgiveness, making the process less a commandment to forget and more a wish in the optative mood. The epilogue then provides an eschatology of the ‘fault held to paralyze the power to act of the “capable being” that we are; and... the possible lifting of this existential incapacity, designated by the term “forgiveness”’ (*MHF*, 457). The depth of fault or height of forgiveness, dynamics between forgiveness and institutions (political, judicial, social), punishment, and blame are all examined. A dialectic of repentance is proposed wherein the issue is ‘the power of the spirit of forgiveness to unbind the agent from his act’ (*MHF*, 459). This is not simply to uncouple a person from an act but rather to uncouple the power at the heart of agency: effectuation and the capacity that it actualizes. This links the notion of forgiveness and its practice to the preceding 500 or so pages of the book, leading the reader towards the conclusion that happiness is the key to understanding the phenomenology of memory and that happy, peaceful, reconciled memory are what we wish for. Within this, however, we must recognise that history can never achieve this aim – the ‘small miracle of recognition’ is blocked by the system of writing that underpins the historiographical operation. This is reinforced by historiography’s use of explanation and understanding and in particular the notion of ‘because’.

Towards a critical hermeneutic of business history (and *Business History*)

As noted at the outset of this piece, the arguments presented in *Memory, History, Forgetting* are woven into a philosophical fabric from which they cannot be separated. Nonetheless, it is our contention that the issues it raises are central to the conduct of business history. Our aim is not to criticize business history, business historians, or the journal used as the source of statements about the historiographical operation. Instead we suggest that the conduct of business history, from engaging with materials generated through memory to publication of argumentative narratives, could be improved significantly through a higher degree of epistemological engagement. Our secondary aim is to assert that such an engagement would assist in making the boundaries of the discipline more permeable, allowing greater interchange with and recognition from ‘mainstream’ scholars of business, management and organization, thereby encouraging a more diverse group of people to engage with business history.

These aims are pursued first through our reading of two key editorials from *Business History* (Harvey and Jones 1990; Harvey and Wilson 2007). In the first of these, the editors note the advances in business history stimulated by Alfred Chandler’s work, with moves towards independent scholarship and theory development especially important. Other key issues raised in this editorial include: writing (the need to

produce shorter pieces as well as multi-volume single company histories), methods (the need for methodological openness as well as archival research), calendrical time (the need to consider history as a connection between past and present, rather than treating all events post-1939 as beyond the pale), defining the field empirically, possibilities for the future, and ‘a more fluid integration of the empirical with the theoretical’ (Harvey and Jones 1990, 16). At this point the practice of business history in the UK was thought to be in the stage of ‘vigorous youth’.

The second editorial (Harvey and Wilson 2007) reflects more on the institutional conditions of business history, noting the creation of new associations and ‘specialist’ journals. Yet two key problems remain: the lack of business history teaching and the lack of influence on other areas of management and organization studies. The editors attribute business history’s ongoing marginality to business schools, in particular the pressure to produce ‘instrumental knowledge’. However, they also note the continuing perception of business historians as ‘fact-mongers without theory’ (Harvey and Wilson 2007, 3). Potential solutions include hitching the historical wagon to contemporary issues such as corporate governance or emphasizing the integrative aspects of historical understanding. More engagement with the social sciences is planned, through inviting scholars from ‘outside’ business history to consider how their work ‘links’ to the field and themed journal issues on topical subjects. Scholarship, however, will continue to be judged first (and foremost) on the basis of the ‘use of primary materials and the depth and originality of the analysis’ (Harvey and Wilson 2007, 6).

In addition to these two agenda-setting pieces we also consider four review papers published in *Business History* in the period between the two editorials (McKinlay 1992; Wale 2001; Blackford 2003; Rollings 2007). These papers are read primarily for their empirical content, as they provide an informed account of business history from within the journal and beyond. The review papers also provide an insight into the engagement of the field with theoretical developments in the social sciences. Our reading of these papers is structured around our interpretation of the Ricoeur’s arguments. The topic throughout is the historiographical operation – not simply the use of archival material, not just assessing the content of archives, and not just the narrative act through which history is produced. This entire, often lengthy, process involves a series of epistemological shifts, each of which affects the status of the claim being made, the reader’s understanding of history, and the identity of the historian. The ultimate aim, as we see it, is for history and historians to assume private, professional, and public reflexivity in what they are doing.

Interpretation of Ricoeur’s arguments thus involves a significant re-orientation of business history. First, the status of data comes into question; not in the sense that data loses status and becomes merely a series of words that lose intrinsic meaning or value – quite the opposite, and this is the main contribution that taking *MHF* seriously would bring. Systematically interrogating the data that business history is based on, for example through asking how the data came to be, what/who is present and absent from it and whose data they are, would result in gains in confidence as to the foundations on which historical analyses are built. Understanding data as already infused with epistemological and ontological values would lead to greater insight as to both their nature and the means of interpretation. Our experience is that published business history does not routinely explore these issues or encourage reflection on its

implications, beyond noting that some data should be treated with caution because of possible bias. The recognition that all memories are subjectively complex and open to question through recognition of the phenomenology of self, even before memory is transformed into document or testimony, would be an entirely different proposition.

Second, exploration of the nature of testimony that conducting business history involves calls that aspect of the historiographical operation into question, but again, in a wholly positive way. As historians transform memory into testimony through defining what is legitimate as archival material and then providing such material with a narrative structure or plot, it is surely right to expect acknowledgement of the shifting ground on which the operation stands. Decisions made as to what data to include or exclude, and further decisions relating to the story woven around archival materials, involve the historian in a relationship of trust with those (both dead and living), who generate the data and read the history produced from it. Beyond exhortations to be ‘true to the archives’ we are not aware that business history takes these relationships, and the nature of the trust implied, seriously enough to write it into accounts.

Third and last, being aware of the nature of the historical condition, and how its hermeneutic can inform the conduct of business history, leads us to consideration of the public duty of the historian. Is there, as Ricoeur implies, an obligation on historians to encourage both remembering and forgetting? We suggest that in business history there is a tendency towards ‘over-remembering’ of certain aspects of practice (for example, the actions of individual early industrialists, or more recently the decision making processes of senior executives in large organizations), and a forgetting of darker aspects of organizational and managerial pasts (for example, slavery or organizational engagement with totalitarian regimes). The critical agency of historians in making decisions as to what form of historical condition we inhabit is, we think, the most challenging of Ricoeur’s three areas of inquiry and also the respect where there has been least systematic activity in business history.

From this we suggest that we are able to think of the norms of business history (and *Business History*) in contrast to theoretically sensitive historiography, perhaps informed by Ricoeur’s arguments, perhaps informed by competing theorizations of the historiographical operation (e.g. White 1987; McCloskey 2006). In his review McKinlay (1992) notes that business history is beginning to emerge from the 19th century and studies of individual companies; nonetheless he also makes clear that the majority of work published continues to focus on that time period or earlier and takes specific named organizations or industries as empirical sites. McKinlay further suggests business historians are starting to treat the data they draw on as a product of memory rather than an objective referent, but he goes on to give an account of business history in 1990 that is overwhelmingly dominated by evidence-based or empiricist, uncausal accounts of uncontroversial ‘events’. Theoretical development is mentioned, principally through moving beyond Chandler’s dichotomies, but it is limited to the importation of analytical frameworks from economics which, as McKinlay notes, is the discipline that business history has traditionally drawn on. However, McKinlay’s review suggests accounting history, an area that has since become established as reflexive and critical in a way business history has not, already shows signs of the reflexivity in historiographical operations that Ricoeur calls for.

From McKinlay's combative and highly individual perspective on business history we move to a more measured and conventional representation. Wale (2001) begins by noting that she could structure her review according to either sector (e.g. mining, agriculture) or topic (e.g. corporate governance), implying this is an indication of increasing diversity. Wale also notes positively that some business history brings the reader to the present day, a significant advance in the conceptualization of the historical condition. Despite these two shifts, however, Wale's account suggests that business history still remains highly empiricist, unicausal, and objectivist – the size of coal wagons is the subject of more scholarly debate than the epistemology of the historical sciences. 'Disproving' and 'revising' arguments are key to making a contribution to the field, rather than reflexive writing that engages with forgetting as well as remembering; anatomization of cost accounts is thought to provide more insight than exploration of why the accounts are archived as they are. Reference is made to a paper published in the field of accounting history that exhorts researchers there to take account of alternative methodologies and theoretical perspectives from the wider social sciences (Parker, 1997), but Wale dismisses this as 'lacking in novelty or originality to most business historians' (Wale 2001, 9). Finally Wale notes that the decade has been one in which it has become clear that business historians will need to adopt 'different methodologies from hitherto' (Wale 2001, 14). However, she gives little sense of what such methodologies might look like.

Following on from this, Blackford (2003) begins by noting with approval the extension of business history into more and varied sectors, as well as highlighting the continuing influence of Chandler's arguments. The tone of this review is if anything more evidence-based, periodized and inferential than Wale's contribution. Studies are said to 'show' highly specific facts, generalization is viewed somewhat suspiciously and empiricist 'findings' are paramount. Once again, cost accounting forms a significant part of British business memory and it is implied that testimony emerges naturalistically from the contents of archives. One paper reviewed that is indicative of this approach concludes that Chandler's ideas cannot be applied to British confectionery firms. Similarly, an account of two papers that debate the contents of a list of the largest British firms in 1907 is typical of the level of epistemological engagement with data. Finally, it appears from this review that the ideal of achieving 'complete' accounts of industries, firms or individuals continues to carry more credibility with historians than anything else.

The final paper in this tetralogy appeared in the same year as the second editorial discussed above. Rollings (2007) begins promisingly, from our perspective, by implying that what is (not) business history is increasingly dependent on the reader as well as the author, an idea that suggests a more poststructural approach. However, the review then proceeds in a much more conventional fashion, categorizing papers according to industry, economics, finance and banking; historians are, according to this review, still 'showing' facts and working towards a complete understanding of, for example, why individual land holdings are scattered around medieval villages rather than conjoined. The final section of this review is rather different from those previously discussed; Rollings claims business history can now be seen as a discipline that is informed by and influences a wide range of other areas of other aspects of social science. He suggests it is now 'rare to discover a business history article which simply provides a narrative account of the development of a particular company or aspect of its operations' (Rollings 2007, 284). Yet it seems from this account of recent

activity within business history that the field remains dominated by what we believe Ricoeur would define as conventional and that the reflexive is in very short supply.

Concluding comments

This paper has been written in a deliberately provocative tone. However, our observations are informed by our own engagement with business history and our desire to engage with this intellectual community. We thus do not see ourselves as somehow ‘outside’ the field, whilst at the same time we cannot claim to be complete cultural or institutional insiders. Our principal aim has been to persuade theoretical non-believers of the need to engage and reflect theoretically on the historiographical operation. Ricoeur’s exploration of memory, history and forgetting provides us with the stimulus to think about business history from a perspective that differs from the annual reviews discussed above. Our secondary aim has been to encourage ourselves and others doing business history to produce more reflexive and theoretically sensitive accounts. This is driven by our belief that responsibility for the lack of recognition of business history from scholars in ‘mainstream’ scholars of business, management and organization, as identified by those working centrally within the field, lies partly with historians themselves.

The ideas proposed here might also be seen as complementary to the development of a new kind of interdisciplinary management and organizational history which seeks to achieve greater reflexivity in relation to research methods and styles of writing (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004). Doing history in a way that brings it to a wider academic and lay audience implies a critical hermeneutic (Ricoeur 1978; Thompson 1981; Phillips and Brown 1993) that focuses in part on the sources of text, why they are produced and who by, recognizing that texts are intentionally produced and intended to be received by others and that they are instrumental in ‘maintaining or changing the cultural fabric of an organization or societal group’ (Phillips and Brown 1993, 1548). Historical narrative must be understood as a compositional process involving events and characters, including the author, with the aim of constructing a unified and meaningful account. This contrasts with a more conventional approach dominated by explanation of how and why events occurred with little concern for how they shape meaning. The narrative then is more than a means of explanation or communication; it is a discursive strategy that indicates a pragmatic aim. More reflexive engagement with the foundations and products of the historiographical operation would help to make the conduct of history less tacit and therefore more comprehensible to non-historians, and thus more difficult to marginalize or dismiss.